THE NEW YORK AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND

HISTORY FINAL REPORT

Edited by Edna Greene Medford, Ph. D.

THE AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND PROJECT
HOWARD UNIVERSITY
WASHINGTON, DC

FOR
THE UNITED STATES GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION
NORTHEAST AND CARIBBEAN REGION

November 2004

Howard University's New York African Burial Ground Project was funded by the U.S. General Services Administration under Contract No. GS-02P-93-CUC-0071

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part Two: Life and Labor in Eighteenth-Century New York

List of Maps

List of Tables

List of Figures

CONTRIBUTORS

DIRECTOR OF AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND HISTORY COMPONENT

Edna Greene Medford, Ph.D. (Howard University)

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Emilyn L. Brown, M.A. (Independent Researcher)
Selwyn H.H. Carrington, Ph.D. (Howard University)
Linda Heywood, Ph.D. (Boston University)
Edna Greene Medford, Ph.D. (Howard University)
John Thornton, Ph.D. (Boston University, Consultant)

RESEARCHERS

Allison Blakely, Ph.D. (Boston University)
Emilyn L. Brown, MA (Independent Researcher)
Selwyn H. H. Carrington, Ph.D. (Howard University)
Michael Gomez, Ph.D. (New York University, Consultant)
Linda Heywood, Ph.D. (Boston University)
Jean Howson, Ph.D. (Independent Researcher)
Edna Greene Medford, Ph.D. (Howard University)
Arnold Taylor, Ph.D. (Emeritus Professor, Howard University)
John Thornton, Ph.D. (Boston University, Consultant)
Jeanne Toungara, Ph.D. (Howard University)

GRADUATE STUDENT RESEARCHERS

Miranda Booker
Roger Davidson, Ph.D.*
Milagros Denis
Lisa Y. King, Ph.D.*
Talitha LeFlouria
Learie Luke, Ph.D.*
Wendi Manuel-Scott, Ph.D.*
Habib Warmack
Charles Wash
Erika Watkins
Louis Woods

UNDERGRADUATE ASSISTANTS

Ana Cardoso (Howard University Ronald McNair Scholar)
Rashauna Johnson (Howard University Ronald McNair Scholar)
Tiffany Johnson (Howard University Ronald McNair Scholar)
Lark Medford (Howard University Volunteer)
Moja Mwaniki (Howard University Ronald McNair Scholar)
Natalie Richardson (Howard University Ronald McNair Scholar)
Marlena Skinner (Howard University Work Study Student)
Benjamin Talton, Ph.D.* (Howard University Ronald McNair Scholar)

SPECIAL ASSISTANCE

Sherrill Wilson, Ph.D. (Office of Public Education and Information, New York's African Burial Ground Project)

ILLUSTRATOR

Michael Colbert

AFRICAN BURIAL GROUND PROJECT ADMINISTRATION/MANAGEMENT

O. Jackson Cole, Ph.D., Project Executive Officer
Executive Assistant to the President, Howard University
James A. Donaldson, Ph.D., Project Manager
Dean, College of Arts and Sciences, Howard University

*Degree awarded after assignment completed with African Burial Ground Project.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The history component of the African Burial Ground Project has benefited from the expertise and dedication of a number of people. Deserving of special recognition are Emilyn Brown, Jean Howson, and Lisa King. Ms. Brown conducted major portions of the New York-based research. Her vast knowledge of local records proved invaluable as we sought to answer a variety of questions regarding African life and labor in the city. Dr. Howson, who now lends her expertise to the archaeology component of the project, spent countless hours combing archival records when the work of the history component first began. Dr. King offered advice on various technical issues and was instrumental in establishing and maintaining the history component database.

A number of students contributed to this report in myriad ways. Mr. Habib Warmack, one of our graduate student researchers, joined the ancestors in 2001. The memory of his optimism and enthusiasm inspired us as we moved toward completion of this report.

Dr. Sherrill D. Wilson, director of Public Education and Information for the African Burial Ground Project, generously shared materials and ideas. The African Burial Ground team, under the direction of Dr. Michael Blakey, suggested likely sources of interest and offered invaluable critical observations.

The history team wishes to thank as well the expert panel of peer reviewers, the Advisory Review Board (ARB), for their comments, observations and recommendations, which were provided for several drafts of the report. Their input led us to expand our initial focus and to produce a more comprehensive study of New York Africans. We also

benefited from the careful review of our report by Professors Sheila Walker of Spelman College and Trevor Hall of Northern Caribbean University in Jamaica.

Howard University Associate Provost Joseph P. Reidy worked tirelessly to outline the scope of work for the history component at the very beginning of the team's involvement in the African Burial Ground Project. His pivotal role in drafting a proposal and budget that reflected the recommendations of the research design and his continued support and encouragement throughout the several years of this study are recognized with appreciation.

Indeed, many individuals have contributed to the completion of our research and preparation of the History Final Report. We would like to express appreciation to Ms. Alma Kemp for her conscientious efforts in assisting with word processing for the final document. In addition, we are especially grateful to Ms. Regina Drake, Dean James A. Donaldson and Dr. O. Jackson Cole for copy editing of the final document.

The history research team reserves its highest regard for the African people who populated colonial New York and whose lives we have attempted to reconstruct in this final report. Their dignity and humanity in the face of oppression remain their greatest legacy. The team's sincere hope is that through its research these New York Africans have been provided the voice that was denied to them in life.

INTRODUCTION

Purpose and Goals

The unearthing of the colonial cemetery known historically as the "Negroes Burying Ground" in Lower Manhattan in 1991 has given both scholars and the general public the opportunity to study and comprehend the broad dimensions of the African-American experience. The African Burial Ground and the remains contained within it provide a unique vantage point from which to view New York City's Africans and their descendants over two centuries. As the final resting place for thousands of enslaved and free black people who lived and labored in the city from roughly 1627 until the end of the eighteenth century, the cemetery offers insight into physical stressors, ethnic identity, cultural continuities and assimilation. While each burial tells an individual story, collectively, they, along with archival evidence, enable us to reconstruct a forgotten community and to reveal the centrality of a marginalized people.

Following the suggestions outlined by the team of multi-disciplinary scholars who developed the Research Design in 1991, the African Burial Ground Project historical researchers pursued two goals. First, they attempted to place the biological and anthropological findings from the cemetery into a historical context, suggesting explanations for certain physical characteristics present in the skeletal remains. Their second task has been to provide a broader understanding of the lives of enslaved and free people in colonial New York. Hence, historical research has addressed issues beyond those specific to the burial ground population.

Methodology

The primary focus of this study is the world of enslaved New York Africans in the second half of the seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth centuries. Although documentary evidence first mentions the presence of a burial ground used specifically by African peoples in 1712, patterns of black settlement point to an earlier date of origin for the cemetery. The study also recognizes that many enslaved New Yorkers were born in Africa or had lived and labored in the Caribbean; a much smaller percentage had sojourned in one of the sister colonies of the British North American mainland. As they brought with them certain experiences that doubtless shaped their responses to the conditions and circumstances they encountered in colonial New York, scholars have conducted their research from a diasporic perspective. In keeping with this approach, the team of historians consisted of scholars with expertise not only in the experiences of African peoples and their descendants in America, but in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century West Africa, West Central Africa, and the Caribbean as well.

The historical data are linked through a database that generally consists of detailed notes of both primary and secondary sources. This has permitted the team to manage a large number of documents and more easily take advantage of opportunities for comparative study. The database is available on CD-ROM.

Whenever possible, the team of historians has employed the term “enslaved,” rather than “slave,” as recognition that New York Africans saw themselves as far more than someone’s property. The terms “African American” and “African” are used interchangeably for the eighteenth century. The use of one rather than the other is not intended to imply degree of acculturation.

Distribution of Tasks

Five members of the research team contributed to the writing of the history report, with each author providing data and interpretation for nearly every chapter. Although this integrative approach precludes attribution of any one chapter to a single individual, each member of the team had primary responsibility for his or her area of expertise. Hence, Drs. Linda Heywood and John Thornton took the lead in those sections pertaining primarily to West Central Africa and West Africa, respectively. Dr. Selwyn H. H. Carrington was the principal researcher and author of the sections relevant to the West Indies. And Ms. Emilyn Brown and Dr. Edna Greene Medford assumed chief responsibility for the sections pertaining specifically to colonial New York. The editor performed the task of integrating the various diasporic pieces. In those instances where she believed it useful to provide a more comprehensive discussion, the editor supplemented the data that had been furnished by the principal researchers. The unabridged reports submitted by each researcher are available in the history component database.

The tasks undertaken by the researchers reflected the key concerns of the 1991 Research Design. The Africanist researchers investigated primarily the question of origins and have focused specifically on attempting to determine what ethnic groups would have been likely victims of enslavement and, subsequently, transported to the Americas in general and to New York in particular. In this regard, they studied the relationships between Europeans and Africans as well as interactions among various ethnic groups on the continent. They traced the trade routes that dealers in enslaved people likely followed and researched social customs and practices, labor regimen, diet,

disease, and other aspects of living conditions among ethnic groups in West and West Central Africa.

The Caribbean research centered on similar areas of study. It involved the analysis of plantation logs and journals, medical and death records, official colonial documents, and personal papers that illuminate the experiences of African peoples in the West Indies. Study of the conditions and experiences of enslaved people in that area was crucial because of the nature of the trade between the islands and colonial New York during much of the period in which the African Burial Ground was in use.

The New York-based research focused on cultural practices; living conditions; resistance; the variety and methods of labor from an age, gender, and seasonal perspective; and other factors that would place the burial ground population in a historical context. The wide range of documentary evidence consulted includes municipal and colonial office records, court cases (both criminal and civil), laws, medical logs, diaries and other personal papers, wills, and newspaper advertisements that announce sales of enslaved people and that offer a glimpse of the persistence of African peoples in their resistance to slavery.

An Overview

African peoples—both at home and in the Americas—witnessed profound change and adjustment in their lives during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As slavery provided the means by which men and nations grew rich, powerful, and dominant over each other, those persons whose lives were thus altered pressed to assert their connection to the human family. As they did so, they drew on lessons learned from individual experiences as well as on the collective memories that had been passed down through the centuries.

While slavery has been regarded by some as a singularly human, if morally repugnant experience, others have emphasized that by its very nature, it reduced people to property. The irony of the inhumanity of humankind reverberates through the ages, perhaps no more so than in the plots of land set aside as the final resting place for those who championed freedom in its most basic forms. It is in this context that we place the men, women, and children who lived and labored in colonial New York, some of whose remains still imprint the soil. Their resolve—at once both extraordinary and mundane—knew parallels in societies throughout the Americas. In the place that was New Amsterdam, and later became known as New York, they fashioned an existence shaped as much by global economic and political interests as by local ones. And they found ways to keep their humanity at the forefront, always through a stubborn determination to reject any limitation on their exercise of those rights reserved to humankind. It is this resoluteness that the history component addresses in the following pages.

The history of the African presence in colonial New York begins with Europe and the African homeland. Trade relationships forged in an era of European exploration

were expanded and perverted in the wake of American "discovery" and conquest. Europe's desire for cheap, plentiful, and compliant labor to aid in its exploitation of the lands in the western hemisphere coincided with and exacerbated the political instability that had settled over much of western and west-central Africa during this period. European men and nations committed to personal and state gain often found willing accomplices in African polities that had little if any regard for the people whose lives stood poised for destruction by the new economy. Certain European and African interests joined to consign millions to the horrors of the Middle Passage and chattel slavery in the Americas.

In colonial New York, African peoples faced their new reality, resolved not simply to survive, but to structure a life for themselves in the midst of exploitation and repression. The lives they created were molded and remodeled as waves of development and expansion swept over the colony. That growth and transition are manifested at several stages in the history of colonial New York: the Dutch period, English conquest, the age of commerce and trade, the maturation of the society by mid-eighteenth century, and readjustment in the post-Revolutionary era.

During the first stage of colonial development, the African experience was shaped by the peculiar needs of a frontier environment. The clearing of land, the erection of public spaces, the feeding of the inhabitants—all occupied the attention of the administrative body, the Dutch West India Company. Hence, it was the company's labor force of enslaved Africans who carved some semblance of a civilization out of the wilderness. During this phase, African peoples occupied an unequal position in the colony as a matter of custom rather than by statutory pronouncement. Taking advantage

of economic instabilities and physical mobility, black men and women pressed for greater autonomy in their daily lives and sought to establish a sense of community among the small and diverse population of African-born and African-descended people.

By the time the English seized New Amsterdam (and the New Netherland colony) and renamed it after the Duke of York in 1664, some enslaved people had won a measure of freedom. Most, however, remained in bondage, and the new masters of the colony hastened to codify the servile status of black men and women. The English passed laws regulating movement and activities during non-laboring hours and seeking to ensure that white men would be protected from the competition of Africans skilled in the trades. Beginning in the late seventeenth century, the English also had augmented the numbers of enslaved laborers primarily through a provisional trade with the West Indies, but also with direct shipments from western Africa. A smaller, illegal trade with East Coast pirates added numbers and diversity to the core groups from the west.

When the new century dawned, the little hamlet had been transformed into a bustling, thriving port town of approximately 5,000 inhabitants, 14 percent (700) of whom were of African origin or descent. The city's population—black and white—was as diverse as were the industries that fueled its economy. Growing prosperity created the desire for more domestic labor, and greater numbers of African women came to characterize the early eighteenth-century demographic pattern. Aside from supplying the basic needs of the household, these women were employed at spinning, weaving, sewing, and brewing. They also bore the added burdens of childbirth and rearing, usually without a co-residential mate. As the economy matured, demographic patterns and the varieties of labor experiences changed. Greater numbers of black men were imported as well, and

although they continued to comprise the bulk of unskilled labor, increasingly, they were used in the trades, despite laws prohibiting this practice. Hence, industries such as coopering, shipbuilding, general carpentry, sail-making, and blacksmithing—skills essential to the local economy—made use of the talents of black men.

By mid-century, however, the growing number of black males began to pose a serious problem for the colony. Marronage, temporary absences, and acts of daily resistance became increasingly troublesome. An earlier emphasis on importations of Africans from the West Indies had led New Yorkers to claim victimization from the practice of "dumping" refuse laborers and those who had been judged incorrigible. While women performed their labors in relative isolation, men—many of them benefiting from the practice of hiring out—roamed the streets unsupervised and caroused until late into the night at drinking establishments and unauthorized places. Late-night forays evolved into criminal activity, as black men formed groups whose aim, on the surface, appeared to be unburdening New Yorkers of their material wealth, but which actually formed the basis of an underground economy for uncompensated labor. These men further threatened the supremacy of the white majority by forging illicit alliances with certain white men and women who themselves harbored resentments against the increasingly stratified society. After a series of burglaries and fires set in the late winter of 1741 convinced the populace that there was an imminent uprising of enslaved people, New Yorkers decided to shift to an emphasis on child importations and direct shipments from Africa. These unseasoned workers (that is, those unfamiliar with the language and labor regimen) required a level of training unnecessary for enslaved laborers obtained from the islands, but New Yorkers felt the risk of continued troubles was too great. This

new influx of African-born laborers facilitated a continuing connection to an African cultural heritage. That heritage was illuminated in the cultural practices apparent on the docks during off-times and at more formal gatherings such as the Pinkster celebrations that originated in Dutch observances of the Pentecost but which, by the eighteenth century, had been shaped by decidedly African characteristics.

When in 1776 the colony joined its sisters in declaring independence from "British tyranny," white New Yorkers had had more than a century and a half to distrust African laborers. Their concerns relative to the loyalty of enslaved people, in many instances, proved warranted. As they had throughout their history in the Americas, men and women of color followed the path that offered the greatest promise for freedom. Those who had fought on the losing side left when the British evacuated the city and hoped that freedom could be realized in Canada.[1] The war itself led to a call for abolition of slavery in New York. Eventually—although it would take nearly a half-century—black men and women achieved statutory freedom.

The post-Revolutionary period witnessed a new intensity in the struggle of people of African descent to assert their humanity. The growing free black community strengthened pre-existing institutions and founded new ones. Pride in heritage found expression in organizations that took the appellation "African." African peoples exercised a political voice in the form of petitions to end repeated abuses and the desecration of their burial ground and to establish a new final resting-place for their

[1] The freedom promised proved illusory. British failure to provide land grants in Canada condemned their black allies to perpetual economic dependence. After suffering from the harsh Canadian environment and a fading hope that true freedom could be achieved in their new home, a group of blacks petitioned to be allowed to settle in Africa under the auspices of the recently established British colony in what would become Sierra Leone. For discussion of their disillusionment with Canada see Robin Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), and Ellen Gibson Wilson, *The Loyal Blacks* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1976).

revered dead. This late eighteenth-century activism had less to do with the revolutionary rhetoric of the previous era than it did with a continuation of the resolve of African peoples to remind white New Yorkers that they were far more than someone's property. It was this persistence that defined their experience in colonial New York for more than two centuries.